

VZCZCXR05237

PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHROV RUEHTRO

DE RUEHRB #0921/01 3261639

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 221639Z NOV 09

FM AMEMBASSY RABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0840

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE

RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 0004

RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 1644

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 000921

SIPDIS

NOFORN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/19/2019

TAGS: PHUM PREL PGOV SOCI KDEM MO XF

SUBJECT: SECRETARY CHALLENGES BMENA CIVIL SOCIETY

Classified By: DCM Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In a November 3 meeting with 11 civil society representatives from the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) region, Secretary Clinton emphasized the importance of civil society's role in the G8-BMENA Forum for the Future process. She highlighted the role youth play in the region; noted the use of technology as an important tool to reach young audiences; and said the USG wants to provide technological support to civil society. Civil society representatives expressed tremendous and heartfelt gratitude to the Secretary for her support for the Forum for the Future. Participants also expressed the need for continued USG support for civil society initiatives in the region, and stressed that the USG should not ignore issues such as human rights and democracy when engaging with governments in the region. End summary.

U.S. Commitment to Human Rights and Democratic Reform

¶2. (C/NOFORN) During the 2009 G8-BMENA Forum for the Future (FFF) Ministerial in Marrakech, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hosted a 30-minute conversation with 11 civil society representatives from the BMENA region. Civil society participants were: Saad Eddin Ibrahim (Egypt), Amina BouAyach (Morocco), Hoda Chalak al-Khatib (Lebanon), Reza Somea (Iran), Bakhtiar Amin (Iraq), Slaheddine Jourchi (Tunisia), Mohsen Marzouk (Qatar), Mensur Akgun (Turkey), Ezzedine al-Asbahi (Yemen), Nabila Hamza (Jordan), and Niccolo Figa-Talamanca (Italy). They are among the 35 civil society leaders who participated in the FFF to engage with regional governments on key issues. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Michael Posner and Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Madelyn Spirnak accompanied the Secretary.

¶3. (SBU) Responding to questions from the press at the top of the meeting, the Secretary highlighted the importance of the FFF, noting that the value of the meeting is that government officials and representatives of civil society come to the same place, at the same time, to share concerns and to seek common cause. She underscored U.S. commitment to advance the work of civil society and to support human rights and democratic reform efforts in the region, and she thanked the invitees for their collaboration in the Forum process.

Democracy Promotion in Egypt and the Role of Youth

¶4. (C/NOFORN) Egypt's Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a U.S.-Egyptian dual national who now lives in the United States, began the discussion by calling attention to his former imprisonment and current self-imposed exile. He recalled that the Forum's inception in 2004 provided a "spark of hope." That spark is

gone now, he said, owing to what he called a lack of commitment on the part of the G8 countries to continue the process, thereby ceding the field to authoritarian regimes. He asked the Secretary to raise human rights and democracy issues during her visit to Egypt and to call for free and fair Egyptian elections in 2010 and 2011. (Note: The Secretary traveled to Cairo and met with Egyptian officials following her visit to Marrakesh. End note.) Publicly relaying this message would give the United States credibility in the eyes of the Egyptian people, he explained.

¶ 15. (C) Secretary Clinton assured that she would raise these issues during her visit. She highlighted that some of Egypt's most politically active citizens are young people who are debating the way forward for their pro-democracy movement. Youth in the region are technologically savvy, she explained, and spread messages through e-mail, SMS, and online chat-rooms. The Secretary said the use of technology is an important tool for reform, and that the United States is ready to provide this support.

Legal Environment for NGOs

¶ 16. (C/NOFORN) Tunisian activist Mohsen Marzouk of the Arab Democracy Foundation, located in Qatar, said civil society had made many approaches to governments to partner with them to promote sustainable human development, and his Foundation had made important financial investments in education and other causes. Nonetheless, he cited the need to work toward expanding the space for non-governmental organizations to

RABAT 00000921 002 OF 002

operate. The legal framework of countries in the region, he explained, should give NGOs their own space, allowing them to be more transparent and have more flexibility to act and manage their own resources.

¶ 17. (C/NOFORN) Affirming that NGOs are essential partners in undertaking effective policy-making and formulation, the Secretary asked the group to address a concern she had heard from governments that too much space for NGOs could lead to increased instances of extremism, and that opening up elections could result in extremist groups coming to power. That would then be the end of democratic elections. Turkish civil society member Mensur Akgun presented the Turkish experience as an example of a secular democracy in the region. He said the United States should be engaged in setting up an organization in the BMENA region similar to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to monitor NGOs. Ibrahim said he has been monitoring extremist groups in Egypt for several years, and he doubts that they would be able to acquire more than 25-30 percent of the votes in free and fair elections. The Secretary did not disagree with this analysis, but left the conversation open by tasking civil society to present to the United States convincing arguments to make to governments of the region on this issue.

Civil Society Capacity Building

¶ 18. (C/NOFORN) The Secretary asked the group how the United States can help protect activists who run afoul of their governments. Iranian activist Reza Somea highlighted the importance of raising the profile of those activists and making sure the world knows who they are. Somea also outlined three areas on which, in his view, the international community needs to focus with regard to civil society in the BMENA region: awareness, empowerment, and capacity building. Somea noted that one of the most common debilitative factors in NGO functioning is the inability to develop and manage strategy, to recognize the essential differences between different options, to choose between options, and to relate different strategic strands to each other to maintain

organizational coherence and optimal use of scarce resources.

He explained that in Iran, civil society institution-building is no longer necessary; however, additional support for capacity building, especially from USG initiatives such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative and Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) programs, is greatly needed. Iranian civil society is not against U.S. engagement with the Iranian regime, he said, but civil society will not flourish where the power of the state is excessive, intrusive, or overly partisan, and, therefore, the United States must continue to highlight the issue of human rights when it engages with authorities. Somea further saluted the work of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in advancing reform and promoting the role of civil society in the region. Bakhtiar Amin, former Iraqi Human Rights Minister, and Hoda al-Khatib Chalak, President of the Lebanese NGO Organization for Civil Activities, echoed his comments in support of MEPI.

¶9. (SBU) DRL Assistant Secretary Posner, who had met with the same group of civil society the previous day, reiterated the Secretary's declaration of support for reform in the region, and reassured civil society that the United States will continue to hear out their concerns and seek progress of the issues they raise.

¶10. (U) This cable has been celared by DRL A/S Posner and NEA A/DAS Spirnak.

Visit Embassy Rabat's Classified Website;
http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Moro_cco

Kaplan